MONATLICHER INFORMATIONSBRIEF ÜBER EVANGELISATION

A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

HOLBROOK LIBRARY
PACIFIC SCHOOL
OF RELIGION

Number 3
March 1960

Department on Evangelism
World Council of Churches
17 route de Malagnou
GENEVA, Switzerland

Sirs:

In a recent issue of the "Monthly Letter about Evangelism" I read that you solicit letters concerning evangelism in various parts of the world. Herewith such a letter.

The work described is that of the Methodist Church among the Ibans of Sarawak. This is a part of the American branch of the Methodist movement. The Church of England has a strong work among the Ibans in another part of Sarawak. The Roman Catholic Church has work also among this people. The work herein described, however, deals only with the Methodist programme.

Our work was established at Kapit, Sarawak in 1939. It was brought to a standstill during the Japanese occupation of Sarawak. 1942-1945. Re-activated after the war, it entered a period of strong growth following the first baptisms of Iban people at Christmas, 1949.

From the beginning, the work was a joint enterprise of American and Batak missionaries. Now our staff comprises Americans (both white and negro), Chinese (from China, Malaya and Sarawak), Bataks, Indians, Philippinos in addition to the local Ibans.

It should be mentioned that the Iban work is only one section of the Methodist Church in Sarawak. Since 1903 we have had strong Chinese work also.

I myself have been associated with the Iban programme since 1948. At present I am most actively linked with the work of literature production and of literacy.

Sincerely yours,

BURR BAUGHMAN

REFERAT FÜR EVANGELISATION · STUDIENABTEILUNG · OEKUMENISCHER RAT DER KIRCHEN

DEPARTMENT ON EVANGELISM · DIVISION OF STUDIES · WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

DÉPARTEMENT D'ÉVANGÉLISATION · DIVISION DES ÉTUDES · CONSEIL ŒCUMÉNIQUE DES ÉGLISES

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

https://archive.org/details/ecumenical-letter-on-evangelism_1960-03_3

EVANGELISM AMONG THE IBANS OF SARAWAK

The Ibans (Sea Dyaks) of Sarawak are a pagan, jungle people. They live in a multi-racial land which is now being rapidly developed by the British and the Chinese. Thus they come intimately into contact with several cultures and peoples different from their own. The stresses of these contacts, and of a rapidly changing life have led many of the Ibans to realize more poignantly than before the inadequacy of their old religious faith.

Much of their religious practice has traditionally centred around:

1. the propitiation of gods and spirits by means of a set, formalized offering;
2. avoidance of bad-luck omens seen in birds and in dreams;
3. the observance of a great number of taboos - especially at times of crisis, such as harvest time, birth of a child, death, sickness and the li .

The presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to these people at this time has offered an opportunity which many are glad to take. It is the opportunity to accept a higher, more satisfying faith when the old is seen to be blatantly inadequate to their needs. It is the chance, through the power of Christ, to free themselves from age-old, restrictive practices which have become a burden.

The Gospel is preached to the Ibans in their own language, in their own homes. They live in widely scattered longhouse communities along the rivers, so travel is difficult. They are over 90% illiterate, so communication is primarily by word of mouth. Yet we have tried specifically to take the Gospel to the Ibans where they live. We have tried to present it in such a way that it would meet the felt needs of the people.

The response at first was slow. This was something foreign. Be careful. There was the danger, the Ibans felt, that in entering Christianity they would be divorcing themselves from their community and culture. This led to the next emphases of our evangelistic effort.

First, we tried to make coming into Christianity a group affair. We did not ask one man to believe in Christ and be baptized. We spoke to the family. Or else we told the interested individual to go home and convince his family. Furthermore, one Christian family in a longhouse community finds it almost impossible to stand up against the weight of the rest of the community and the age-old pagan customs. So before baptism we urged that this matter be discussed openly in the longhouse so that several families would be able to take that step at the same time. With several Christian families standing together, the Christian group has the strength to endure and to grow.

Secondly, we tried to relate Christianity intimately to the lives and culture of the Iban people. For example: after the first two introductory occasions, baptisms were not administered in a central, village (foreign) church, but in the homes of the Ibans. Worship services were held on the verandas of the long-houses, where the Ibans have worshipped from time immemorial. The high days of the Iban year (e.g. the beginning of the rice planting cycle) were celebrated with Christian worship. And as we were able, we included in these special Christian services traditional Iban features, such as eating together, and prayers couched in Iban poetic phraseology.

Shortly the Ibans began coming into the church in increasing numbers. The Holy Spirit seemed to have set up a chain reaction. A small Christian group in a longhouse would grow until most, or all, of the house was Christian. Friends and relatives in other houses would hear the good news and ask to be Christian. From upriver and downriver came the call of those who had heard of Jesus Christ, and who wanted a minister to come and tell them more.

It was not possible to give long courses of pre-baptismal instruction to all those seeking to follow Christ. At the time they came searching, that was the time to bring them into the fold. We could not turn them away, saying, "Sorry, we have no trained minister to teach you. Wait until we can establish a primary school, then a high school, then a theological school. Then after we have some graduates from that theological school, we can send someone up to teach and baptize you - if we have travel expenses."

In a few sessions of worship and teaching we tried to get across some idea of what Christ is, and of what it means to follow him. Then we asked the simple questions, "Will you give up your old gods, your auguries and your taboos? Will you, to the best of your knowledge and ability, follow the Lord Jesus Christ, and him alone?"

Those who answered "Yes" were accepted for baptism.

This, of course, meant that baptism was not the crowning of the perfect Christian. It was the first step on the long, hard road to salvation. It committed the new Christian to following and to learning. It committed the church to nurture and education.

As any Christian group became established in a longhouse, it chose its own "worship leaders". These volunteer, unpaid workers kept the congregation faithful to its Christian purpose. They gathered the group together on Sunday. They led the prayers and worship whenever the minister was not able to be present. On special occasions, such as those of sickness or death, they took charge of the worship.

In addition to these, a few Iban young men were recruited and partially trained to work as full-time pastors. A theological school in the central town of Subu is training others who will be the ordained ministry of the church. Each trained

worker has a circuit of several longhouses. He visits each longhouse as often as time and funds permit. Usually, though, this is not more than once a month.

The fruitful growth of the church has come because the Ibans have found in Christ something that meets their needs. Over and over again the new Christians have said, "Through the Lord Jesus we have been freed. We have been freed from the power of the birds and of dreams. We have been freed from the old taboos and restrictions. These things did not help us, but held us back. In the Lord Jesus we are able to move forward into a better life."

This has come about through the evangelism of the word. Always our church has been concerned with the broad range of the needs of the Ibans. We have established schools. We have instituted a programme of agricultural assistance. We have finally established a hospital and clinics. But these service activities are subsidiary. The foundations of our Christian community were laid before such activities were firmly established. The present growth of the church is greatest in areas where we have no school, or hospital or agricultural programme. That growth comes through the ministry of the word of God.

The picture, of course, is not all light and roses. There are problems and dangers of which the church is conscious, and which it is meeting to the best of its ability.

One great problem is that too many Christians, having taken the first step, seem to think that is the end of the journey. They learn nothing of the depths of Christian faith, and grow very little in the Christian life.

Another problem is the difficulty of teaching the new Christians even when they wish to learn. Trained ministers and teachers are scarce. (Here are the problems of recruiting, training and supporting church leaders.) The high rate of illiteracy puts the burden of Christian education on word-of-mouth communication - an impossible task when considering the widely scattered community and the scarcity of trained personnel. (Here rises the problem of literacy training.) Even if there were large numbers of literate Christians, there is, aside from the Iban New Testament, very little in the way of Christian printed material. (Here is the problem of literature production.)

The hearts of the Iban people are open to the Gospel. The Holy Spirit is working mightily among them. The evangelism of the word has brought a multitude to Christ. Now the evangelism of education and service must confirm and strengthen these new Christians in their faith, and lead them on into true discipleship.